



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT of HEALTH

GUEST OPINION ARTICLE

For Immediate Release:
April 8, 2005

For More Information, Contact:
Stacy Eberl
Public Information Officer
North Dakota Department of Health
Phone: 701.328.2372
E-mail: sleberl@state.nd.us

This guest opinion is by State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.

Length: Approximately 430 words

Whatever Happened to Polio? **By State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.**

Today, 50 years after the introduction of the polio vaccine, parents in the United States rarely think about a disease that was once an obsession for parents around the world. However, we must not forget that before the vaccine became available, more than 16,000 Americans were diagnosed with paralytic polio each year.

“Safe, effective, and potent”—these words spoken on April 12, 1955, announced the availability of the Salk polio vaccine. The development of the vaccine by Dr. Jonas Salk and his colleagues was an accomplishment that ended global fear of a dreaded contagious disease and, in the process, reshaped the conduct of science, the funding of science, and the public’s role in the support of science. These efforts forever changed the way that public health is administered and advanced the general understanding of ways basic scientific research benefits humanity.

The fight against polio brought together communities in a national collaboration that at that time was the largest human cooperative effort in history. In the days leading up to the vaccine’s approval, children across the United States participated in field trials as America’s “Polio Pioneers.” These pioneers proved that a vaccine could prevent the paralyzing disease. Thousands of people volunteered their time to assist with the vaccine field trials, while millions of Americans participated by raising funds in their communities in support of a single goal: victory over polio.

-- more --

600 E. Boulevard Ave. Dept. 301, Bismarck, North Dakota 58505-0200
Phone: 701.328.2372 Fax: 701.328.4727 E-mail: health@state.nd.us

Visit the health department home page at www.health.state.nd.us

Polio was eliminated in the United States because protecting the public's health was perceived as a simple necessity. Every effort was made to see that the vaccine would be freely distributed and that polio would be eradicated. We have made great progress in a very short time. We now have the means to protect our nation's children against terrible diseases, such as polio, that in the past caused great suffering, disability and premature death in the United States. However, polio and other diseases still exist in Asia and Africa. In a continually shrinking world, vaccine-preventable diseases are only a plane ride away.

Vaccines have been one of the most important health gains in the past century. Because infants and young children are particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases, it is critical that they are protected through immunization. Children who are not immunized increase the chance that others will get the disease.

Since the polio vaccine was introduced 50 years ago, we can now protect children from more than 12 vaccine-preventable diseases. Without diligent efforts to maintain immunization programs here and to strengthen them worldwide, the diseases seen 50 years ago remain a threat to our children.

-- 30 --